

## **Submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Regional Telecommunications Review 2021. My submission relates to telecommunications specifically in the Kalang/Bellingen area. My property is located on the Kalang River, approximately 17.5km south from Bellingen, (population approximately 13,000), and situated approximately 40km as the crow flies from the east coast of NSW.

In addition to raising specific areas of concern, I have attached a recent record of events that occurred with Telstra in relation to internet problems/outages that took approximately five months, and countless hours, to resolve. This is an example of the difficulty in resolving major service problems.

### **Telecommunications services in my area:**

- ADSL copper line phone (landline) and internet (modem/wi-fi).
- No mobile phone towers.
- No mobile phone reception.
- Reception for ABC radio (sometimes poor during storms).

### **Key issues affecting telecommunications services in my area:**

- Power outages (sometimes lasting days, once 9 days) during storm, floods and bushfire activity, limiting the ability to use the internet, apps or television - often when emergency information is most critical.
- Flooding that prevents egress from the property and/or into Bellingen – sometimes lasting days and occasionally a week or more.
- High fire risk and more frequent flooding (increasing due to climate change) which places increased need for telecommunications services to be fit for purpose.
- No mobile phone access.

### **Access to power and telecommunications in an emergency**

- The inability to access emergency information during power outages (which generally occur when there are floods, storms or floods). Because we have no mobile phone access, if the 'landline' internet is down, we are unable to use any apps during emergencies. During the fires in 2019, we could not follow the Fires Near Me app, (we had fires to the north, west and south of our property) or receive government advice or information during power outages. While it is possible to access ABC radio, their information was very general, and hours of listening may be required before our area was discussed, and then in no detail to provide useful information.
- We also have frequent floods, which prevent us crossing the river to exit the property. The internet is frequently affected during floods. This prevents us seeking information about the flood status, and observing the live flood web cams (4 located in this area). In addition, because the flood cams are solar powered, they only operate for about 4 days, when the flooding may last in excess of this. These flood cams give us information about when we can get road access to Bellingen.

- Tardy repair of power and telecommunications infrastructure, leaving us sometimes with days, and up to a week with no power, which means no internet, and sometimes no landline phone.

### **Access to businesses, banking and government services**

- No mobile phone service/coverage. This affects much of the general business that is normally conducted at home on the internet, including government business, payment of bills, access to banking, contact with suppliers/tradespeople, access to healthcare, access to services, etc. Frequently, online businesses and government agencies rely on the receipt of an SMS code to provide secure access to their services, to download apps or programs, to access bank/telecommunications/ energy accounts, and so on. There seems to be little understanding of how many people are affected by either low quality or no mobile phone access, and who are unable to access these codes. Three recent examples of this are:
  - a) I was unable to login to the Covid Safe Check-in app at a business because I was in a 'no mobile phone coverage area'. They had no option to sign in manually.
  - b) I was unable to download a security app for the ATO, because I could not receive an SMS code.
  - c) Telstra repeatedly closed my complaint because I was not responding to txt messages, even though on every phone call I made to them, I explained that I had no mobile phone access.
- This has an almost daily impact.
- It is inefficient.
- In a number of cases, it requires a secondary code generating app to be downloaded alongside the primary app, using more of my limited mobile phone memory.

### **Telstra monopoly on quality mobile phone coverage in regional areas**

- While we have no mobile coverage in Kalang, I can use my mobile phone when I go into Bellingen and elsewhere. Because I use my mobile infrequently, I have a very cheap non Telstra plan. This means that there are significant areas where I get little, or no coverage. Quality mobile coverage in many regional areas is monopolised by Telstra. I have recently driven to Townsville, and in the past, to Sydney, to Mildura and to south eastern Victoria. There are many, many times I had no mobile phone access, even on the A1/M1. This is the main highway through NSW and Queensland. This is not acceptable. Mobile phone coverage outside of city areas is poor.
- If I do want the most extensive coverage, Telstra is the only option; however, Telstra are massively more expensive than other providers. This monopoly should be investigated by the regulator. Customers should not have to pay exorbitant prices just to receive basic coverage.

### **Telstra's poor customer service in regional areas**

- Telstra have no interest or understanding of the issues and needs of regional customers. Their interest is focused on city customers and businesses.
- Telstra seems unable to locate and repair major system faults in a timely manner.
- Telstra's customer service is appalling, with call centre staff who have no understanding of the issues or ability to contact staff in Australia with on-ground experience.
- Telstra seems to have a policy of wearing the customer down, by making it so time consuming and onerous to phone them with a problem that they seem to hope you eventually just give up in despair.

- For details of my recent experience with Telstra – please see my Complaint/Report below.

### **Other Australian telecommunications issues requiring legislation changes**

- Phones come preloaded with apps that use memory but are unnecessary to the working of the phone. Phone companies should not be able to force purchasers to have apps they do not want or use. All apps that do not affect the operating system of the phone must be removable.
- Unable to remove multiple Google apps from my phone, even though they are not required for the phones operation.
- Unable to access apps without using Google products.
- Unable to remove Facebook app (and some other apps I do not want or have never used) from my phone.
- Apple has similar monopolies on iphones.
- These are monopolistic and coercive practices.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, regional areas are poorly serviced by telecommunications. I hope my non technical submission will provide some insight to the problems experienced by people who live in rural areas quite close to larger towns or cities, but have very little supporting infrastructure, including access to fast internet, and mobile phone coverage.

To support my submission, I have provided below a Complaint/Report I have sent to Telstra. It documents a recent ongoing problem I had, and the months long resolution. I hope it offers some insight into the dysfunctional processes of our largest telco, and the difficulties in resolving these issues.

Regards

Jennifer Campbell

## Report of Telstra Complaint

The following report documents my recent experience with Telstra. This internet outage issue took approximately five months, and more than 10 hours of phone calls with Telstra. This information is not complete. I requested the information they had on all my calls, what was documented and what action was taken, however, Telstra has refused to give me the call logs. I didn't start taking notes initially, or note down all the phone calls in the beginning. Had I known what a saga it was to become, I would have noted things with more detail.

In April 2021, I started to experience sporadic internet outages for an hour or so in the early morning. I didn't know what time they started, but the internet was down when I woke up around 6 – 6.30, and didn't come back on til about 9am.

This was an outage that became more frequent over the following months, until I had no internet at all. This was a problem that affected multiple properties in the area (I know this because I phoned many others who were having the same problem. Telstra refused to confirm this, and continued to suggest it was a problem at my residence – which was not correct).

I am still none the wiser what the actual problem was. Telstra have not been able to articulate what was wrong and why it took so long to fix.

In itself, ringing Telstra is difficult as:

- It takes a minimum of 6 mins just to get through the auto response process, only to be put on hold for extended periods.
- The voice activation often does not recognise voice responses, so these need to be repeated. I have a clear unaccented voice, so this is possibly much worse for others.
- The automation process requests an authorisation code sent to SMS to confirm identity. We have no mobile phone service in our area. There is no option to select 'no' mobile. Telstra should be aware that there are areas of Australia (1000s of people) who do not have mobile phone access.
- They send the code regardless. This was a problem because Telstra kept closing my case as I was not responding to text messages, even though I had explained to every operator that I did not have mobile phone access and could not receive txt messages. Each one told me not to worry about it – this would not affect the case.
- Every operator had to be advised that I have no mobile phone access, and that I am on ADSL. Each operator made an assumption that this was an NBN problem. Telstra needs to amend their programs so that the operators have this information front and centre when they answer the call.
- Despite every operator apparently having notes about previous calls, the information was required to be repeated over and over.
- Every operator requested that I test/reset the modem, even after a technician had been to the house and tested the modem, the lines in and out of the house etc.
- The phone was cut off numerous times while waiting for an operator, and numerous times during the phone call with the operator. When I phoned again, I could never speak to the same person again, requiring me to repeat the issues.
- Excruciating on hold music, which stops and starts so you think you've finally got through to an operator, then the music starts again. Or it just stops and the phone disconnects.
- Operators are located in India. All have been lovely (except for one very rude guy, but that's another story). The reason I am raising this is that they have great difficulty understanding

that mobile phones don't work everywhere in Australia, that ADSL is 'a thing' anymore, and they don't understand the geographical problems.

- Operators are not able to contact technical staff or 'on the ground' in Australia. The technicians on the ground can be booked by these operators, but the operators cannot speak to the technicians. Appointments can take days and weeks, and there is no information provided to them about the technical problems.
- I was promised multiple times by operators that they would investigate and that I would receive a return call between agreed hours. On one occasion that happened. There was a call back once that I think was from Telstra, but the message was incomprehensible.
- I was repeatedly told my case had been escalated, when in fact the complaint had been closed multiple times without resolution. Hence the multiple INC (incident) numbers.

### Reported Incidents:

This is a record of most (but not all) of my interactions with Telstra, relating to this one specific problem of internet outages each morning. As stated, I spent more than 10 hours on the phone (and on Twitter) to @Telstra and still my internet was not working. The matter was resolved approximately 5 months after it commenced.

April ?	██████████	Called Telstra 1 hour	Internet not working in the early morning. Service returns about 9am.
18 May?	██████████	Called Telstra	Internet not working in the early morning. Service returns about 9am.
May ?	██████████		Internet not working in the early morning. Service returns about 9am.
5 June		Did not report	Internet not working in the early morning. Service returned about 9am.
6 June	██████████	Called Telstra - 2 calls 20 minute call	Internet not working
8 June	██████████		Internet not working
8 June			Phone call from technician in the area – advised software problem at Telstra. Not Telstra hardware. He was unable to fix as he dealt with hardware issues.
9 June			Multiple text messages to my phone (which I did not receive until days/weeks later) that advised that 'the connection issue on your ADSL service is now fixed. This ticket will now be closed'. This is despite me telling every operator that I do not have mobile phone coverage, and that the problem was far from resolved.
10 June		Called Telstra 50 min call	Internet not working – advised of area wide outage?

13 June		Called Telstra	Advised 'ticket' was closed because I hadn't responded to SMS notices which I can't get because I have no mobile phone service. I wasn't sure which of the multiple tickets. Advised problem not fixed.
14 June		Twitter	Internet not working. Contacted @Telstra via Twitter. Now at 8 days of no internet. Was told every outage is different so this can impact the time of resolution. Thanks for nothing.
17 June		Called Telstra 30 minute call	Internet not working.
18 June		Called Telstra 22 minutes into waiting, call cuts out. New call – 14 mins in, call cuts out. Next call, operator answers. No sound. Call cuts out. Finally got through on 4 <sup>th</sup> call.	Internet not working.
18 June		Called Telstra 1 hr 19 min call.	Internet not working. Technician booked for 21 June. Internet started working after she did some configuration at her end.
18 June		Twitter	Contacted Telstra via Twitter. They suggest I do trouble shooting on the internet. The internet THAT IS NOT WORKING, and that I've had to drive 20km to town to use at the Library. Also contacted @Telstra via Twitter at an earlier time but I deleted those tweets in frustration.
18 June		Twitter (██████)	Twitter (██████) - advised that the outage in my area has "cleared up". No it hasn't.
18 June		Twitter (Jo)	Advising Telstra are here 24/7 if I should need anything! Like fixing my internet maybe?
18 June			Multiple text messages to my phone (which I did not receive until days/weeks later) that sent multiple one time codes and advised that 'the connection issue on your ADSL service is now fixed. This ticket will now be closed'. This is despite me telling every operator that I do not have mobile phone coverage, and that the problem was far from resolved.
21 June		Technician to property	Technician checked all lines. Checked modem. Everything working fine. Confirmed software

			issue at Telstra. Not line or modem issue at residence. The copper phone line has been working throughout.
27 June	██████████	Called Telstra 15 minute call	Internet still not working – escalated to Level 2 support. Advised they would call back in 24 hours. No call back received.
28 June		Called Telstra 10 minute call	Internet not working.
29 June	██████████	Called Telstra Phone cut out at 8 min point. Phoned again. 17 min call.	Internet not working.
6 July		Called Telstra 11 minute call	Internet not working.
6 July		Telstra called me	Telstra called me. They advised that there was no outage, despite the internet not working. I advised that three Telstra technicians on the ground, in Australia, have advised me that this is a Telstra software problem. Problem still not resolved.
7 July			Internet not working
7 July			Multiple text messages to my phone (which I did not receive until days/weeks later) that sent multiple one time codes and advised that ‘the connection issue on your ADSL service is now fixed. This ticket will now be closed’. This is despite me telling every operator that I do not have mobile phone coverage, and that the problem was not resolved.
7 July	Complaint number provided #██████████	Twitter (██████)	Advised that he/she wanted to sort this and did I have a complaints number. I have not been provided with a complaints number, despite having loaded a complaint online and a second one through Twitter – hence all the Twitter activity. Complaint number provided #██████████
8 July			I left to travel to Townsville. While I was away, there were intermittent problems reported to me by household members. Telstra called me during my stay in Townsville to follow up but as I was not on the ground in Kalang, there was little either of us could do.
13 July		Twitter (██████)	Check to see whether my fault has been resolved. That would be a no.

13 July		Twitter (████████)	Advised that my complaint has been withdrawn! Asked if I had any previous complaints!!
14 July		Twitter (████████)	████████ has sent an email to the case manager and the complaints allocation team to reopen the case and they will contact me by the end of the week.
16 July			Text message to my phone advising that 'the connection issue on your ADSL service will automatically closed if they don't hear from me. No contact from the case manager.
17 July		Twitter (████████)	████████ asks whether the case manager has emailed. Apparently she's called ██████████. No she has not emailed.
17 July		Twitter – automated message	'Thanks for talking to us today, if you have a moment, we would love to know how we did'. I rather think you wouldn't.
19 July		Twitter (████████)	Advising that "she's not sure why, but the complaint was withdrawn. She has requested that the complaint be reopened and that I be contacted asap. Third time the complaint has been closed without reason or remedy.
19 July		Twitter (████████)	Advised that she couldn't give me a resolution timeline because it wouldn't be 'building the correct expectations'.
22 July		Twitter (████████)	In response to my message to report no phone call as promised, ██████████ has checked the complaint and contacted the mysterious Case Manager, ██████████. Yet to be convinced she exists at this stage.
23 July		Twitter (████████)	Will check in over the next few days to see how things are going. No phone call yet.
23 July		Twitter (████████)	████████ advises that he has requested follow up from the Case Managers Team Leader.
So that would be ██████████, ██████████, ██████████, ██████████, ██████████, ██████████, ██████████, ██████████, ██████████, ██████████ and ██████████ on Twitter alone. And ██████████. She did eventually call me. On the 27 July.			
27 July		Telstra called - ██████████ the Case Manager	She seemed less than conciliatory. I reminded her that it was now five months since my first reported the ongoing problem. She was nonplussed. She told me they were busy. She finally gave me the Complaints Case reference number. She said she would adjust my bill as compensation.
3 August		Telstra ██████████	Advised that she was investigating with



		phoned again.	technicians and that she would arrange for my bill to be adjusted. She never did.
14 September		Email from [REDACTED], a Telstra 'Complex Complaints Resolution- Specialist'	She acknowledged that the handling of the complaint was less than satisfactory. She provided me with a complaints number: 15265396. I am not sure whether this is in response to the online complaint I made sometime in June.

In this email, Telstra offered me a settlement, and a discount on my service. I am grateful for this; however, I do not believe that anything I experienced will be considered, evaluated, or processes or systems fixed. Telstra clearly use the theory that people don't have hours to follow up on these issues and that people will eventually give up.

I rely on my internet because I have no mobile coverage for alternative internet access. I read newspapers online because we have no paper delivery. I read books online because I live 17kms away from the Library. I watch TV/Netflix online. I look up phone numbers because there are no longer hard copy phone books. I bank, do my taxes, pay bills online. And so on. So when my less than satisfactory ADSL is not working, I will stop at nothing to make sure it is fixed.

At the moment, my internet is working satisfactorily. I hope it continues to do so.